

AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE WINFIELD DUNN PROJECT
INTERVIEW WITH
THEODORE WAGNER

BY - CHARLES W. CRAWFORD
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ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE
MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY

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AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE WINFIELD DUNN ADMINISTRATION

INTERVIEW WITH THEODORE WAGNER

MAY 20, 1977

BY CHARLES W. CRAWFORD

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PLACE Oak Ridge, Tennessee

DATE May 20, 1977

Theodore F. Wagner
(Interviewee)

Charles W. Crawford
(For the Mississippi Valley Archives
of the John Willard Brister Library
of Memphis State University)

THIS IS THE ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE OF MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY. THE PROJECT IS THE "WINFIELD DUNN CAMPAIGN AND ADMINISTRATION." THE INTERVIEW IS WITH MR. THEODORE F. WAGNER. THE DATE IS MAY 20, 1977. THE PLACE IS OAK RIDGE, TENNESSEE. THE INTERVIEW IS BY DR. CHARLES W. CRAWFORD, DIRECTOR OF THE MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE. TRANSCRIBED BY BETTY WILLIAMS. INTERVIEW #1.

DR. CRAWFORD: Mr. Wagner, let us start with some background information about you and then we will get on to your first contact with Winfield Dunn.

MR. WAGNER: I was born April 7, 1921 in Madison, South Dakota and was born and raised and went through high school there. My father was a college professor there and my mother was a college professor. That is where they met. One was from Pennsylvania and the other from Kansas and they both came to Madison to teach in the college there and met and were married and all four of the children were born there. Subsequent to that then, during World War II, I went to the United States Military Academy and after I graduated then I served in the regular army. Then I resigned from the regular army and took the reserve commission and eventually ended up with Union Carbide in Oak Ridge, Tennessee in 1951.

We moved to Kingston, Roane County in 1955 and our three children were born there in Roane County. In 1960 I had been active in political affairs just as an interested citizen in poli-

tics prior to that time, but in 1960 I started taking a very active interest not just a personal interest but an active interest in the political activity in Roane County and the state and the nation and worked very hard in the national election of 1960.

Subsequent to that each state and national election thereafter I have been very active in political affairs in 1962 and 1964 and 1966 and every two years since then.

Now in 1966 I was elected chairman of the Republican Executive Committee in Roane County, Tennessee. And that same year I was the chairman of the Dan Kuykendall campaign for the Senate. Is that right, was it 1966?

DR. CRAWFORD: Yes, we have interviewed Dan Kuykendall.

MR. WAGNER: Now, I came to be a great admirer of Congressman Kuykendall which he was at that time. He was very busy in other parts of the state and was not able to come to Roane County. Mrs. Kuykendall did come to Roane County one day. I spent all day with her and we walked all over the county and we worked hard. The results were that he did carry Roane County.

We became very good friends as a result of this campaign. Although he was unsuccessful in becoming a senator, he established quite a reputation throughout the state whereas before it was primarily in the Ninth District--what was then the Ninth District in Tennessee.

In 1968 he again ran and won and while I could not work for him directly I did send him some money and he won again. We had conversations in the past and in 1969 he was again thinking of

running for the Senate race in 1970 when the incumbent Democrat who had won in 1966 on a short-term replacement basis was thinking of running.

He called one day from New Orleans to say that he would be in Kingston and Roane County the following day or a few days later and could I set up a meeting with some people that he could talk with. This was done about September of 1969. While he was here he mentioned that he knew of somebody who might want to run for Governor in 1970 on the Republican ticket. Now this was quite surprising--not that he had mentioned or knew of somebody, but the fact that somebody was really interested in making a serious run at the Governor's race in 1970 in Tennessee as a Republican. And the person that he mentioned at that time was Winfield Dunn who was a friend of his and a very active dynamic individual, very capable whom he felt would make a strong campaigner and an excellent Governor. So the name sort of stuck in the back of my mind but not much was said about it because he was not there to campaign for Winfield Dunn but rather to further his [own] candidacy as he was judging his capability and his strength throughout the state for his campaign for the Senate nomination in 1970.

That same Christmas--Christmas, 1969--three months later I received a Christmas card from Winfield Dunn in which he wished me and my family well and at the same time wanted my honest comments and remarks about his being a candidate for the Republican nomination for Governor in 1970 the following year.

There were other comments in the letter in addition to the Christmas card. That same day I sat down and wrote on the back of

a 8 1/2" by 11" sheet of paper a whole page of hand-written ideas, thoughts and comments about this.

Two months later in February in 1970 the Republican Party in Knox County, which is a very strong and large one in our section of the state, had its annual Lincoln Day dinner. Those of us in the smaller counties at that time had not been having dinners so that we would all congregate at the Knox County one. At that time Winfield Dunn and Betty Dunn were present and I met him personally for the first time at that dinner and prior to the dinner at a reception and he was mentioned as one of four or five candidates as I recall in February 1970 who were thinking of running for governor in the primary that year.

Time passed and April and May came around and it was getting time for the candidates to announce whether or not they were in fact going to be candidates for the primary in August. I had been contacted by a district campaign manager for one of the other candidates for Republican governor at that time. I said that I was thinking and I still hadn't committed myself to anybody at that time. This was about April or May of 1970.

Two or three weeks later Winfield Dunn came through Roane County and made contact with a man who had indicated that he would be his campaign manager in Macon County. Do you want his name?

DR. CRAWFORD: Yes, was this in April or May?

MR. WAGNER: This was probably in May.

DR. CRAWFORD: Who was the person?

MR. WAGNER: Grover Trent had already committed himself to be the campaign manager in Roane County for Winfield Dunn in 1970. I had been contacted in April by the Roane County campaign manager what was then the Third Congressional District and I had been contacted by the Congressional District to be another candidate's campaign manager in Roane County.

DR. CRAWFORD: Which one was that, Mr. Wagner?

MR. WAGNER: It was Maxey Jarman. I did not commit myself at that time. Then this meeting took place and Winfield Dunn came to Grover Trent's office one afternoon. And when I got home from work I received a call from Grover asking me to come down to his office that evening to talk with Winfield Dunn. I did keep the appointment and did go down to talk with Winfield for three quarters to an hour--just the two of us together. Trent was not in the room with us. At that meeting I committed myself to be Third District Coordinator for Winfield Dunn. Grover Trent was Roane County Chairman and I would take the Third Congressional District which at that time was made up of twenty-one or twenty-two counties. I would be the coordinator of that to work toward his nomination and subsequent election.

DR. CRAWFORD: Where did this meeting take place?

MR. WAGNER: It was in Kingston in Roane County. Grover Trent is a real estate man in Kingston and it was in his office building.

DR. CRAWFORD: Do you remember approximately the date of that meeting?

MR. WAGNER: Other than being the middle or latter part of May 1970 as close as I can recollect at this time.

DR. CRAWFORD: Mr. Wagner, after agreeing to serve as District Three Campaign Coordinator how did you undertake to perform your duties? What did you see as being your responsibility in this position?

MR. WAGNER: In a few days after making that commitment and after Winfield Dunn had an opportunity to return to his office, I received a call from one of the administrative assistants or secretaries in the campaign office in Nashville introducing herself and just getting some background information from me so that he could make a formal announcement and giving me her name and telephone number and address so I would have some person to contact for the information that I needed and likewise she got the same information from me. Initially, there were several things that I recall that we did. First, I received from the . . . (tape recorder difficulty)

I contacted the state Republican headquarters to ask them to send me the names and addresses of the Republican chairman in each one of those twenty-one counties. When I received that I wrote each one of those chairmen telling them who I was and my duties, what their functions and responsibilities were and asking them to name a campaign chairman in their county for Winfield Dunn if one had not already been named.

In addition I advised them that I was available to come to any rallies, Republican meetings, picnics or other functions that

they might be having in their counties during the next few months in behalf of the candidacy of Winfield Dunn and would be happy to come and speak to them.

I also was visited by Lee Smith who was a coordinator for, I guess, the east half of the state of Tennessee and some other young man who was coordinator for maybe two or three Congressional districts. I believe Lee had three or four or five districts and I think that somebody had the First, Second and Third Districts. He stopped by and we visited and he gave me material and suggested other things that I might do.

This was during May and June and my biggest responsibility and I guess I spent more time in contacting and being in contact with the various county campaign managers for Winfield Dunn which we were able to develop. I received calls from various county chairmen or Winfield Dunn chairmen in various counties about certain activities or wanting his position on this or that. From the material that I had available I could either relay them to them or xerox copies and send them to them on a position paper which he may have stated recently.

This was all taking place in June and July. I attended various picnics in different counties and when candidates were asked to be present--he couldn't be at all of them--so I would go up and represent him and give a few appropriate comments in behalf of his candidacy. Now when he was nominated then, do you want to go into that now or do you have any other questions?

DR. CRAWFORD: I'd like to ask a few questions about the primary before we get to the general, Mr. Wagner. On becoming Third District Coordinator you contacted the Republican County Chairmen in each of the counties. Some of them doubtless had other interests than Winfield Dunn because I know the other candidates had announced earlier. What kind of cooperation did you get?

MR. WAGNER: Well, my letter had requested that they name a campaign coordinator from their county for Winfield Dunn. The county chairman is expected normally to be independent in the primary and for any candidate that comes in and escort him around the county and not overtly give support to one over the other in the primary.

DR. CRAWFORD: Had that been followed so far as you know?

MR. WAGNER: As far as I know this was followed quite closely. I was Chairman and I did this and I did not make a commitment. Whenever a candidate came through I spent the day with him or her and only after the primary did I support the Republican ticket in its entirety wholeheartedly. But prior to that, I remained neutral and escorted any candidate who came through the county when I was Roane County's chairman for four years.

Now in many counties that we have in the Third District at that time there were not really a strong Republican organization in the county. As a result in many cases it was one-way communication. I was sending letters and information and material to them asking them to distribute it throughout the county. In some cases

I received replies back with names and addresses of people and asking for me to come make talks and things like this. In some of the more scarcely populated counties and some of the rural counties which are quite far from centers of population and which had for years by tradition been strongly Democratic I did not get much cooperation even from the few Republicans who were there. It was probably because they were too busy just taking care of the activities in their own county and not being able to spend that much time in correspondence with one particular campaign chairmen.

DR. CRAWFORD: What were the strongly Democratic counties in the Third District?

MR. WAGNER: These were counties generally west of Roane County. Roane County was the eastern border of the Third District and being a swing county sometimes it will be Republican and sometimes it will be Democratic, but those counties generally west of there between there and Smith County and the county that Lebanon is in, north between that line from I-40 north to the Kentucky line is generally the Third District or was at that time as I recall. Those counties were pretty rural, sparsely populated and generally strongly Democratic.

DR. CRAWFORD: What were your strongest counties then?

MR. WAGNER: Well, Roane County, Cumberland County, and I do think Loudon County was in the Third District at that time. I've been in Loudon County so much I am pretty certain that was one. Anderson County is usually Democratic, but at that time--seven years ago--it was not so strongly

Democratic that we felt we had a very good chance of carrying it and considerable time and effort was spent on it. I don't think we had Hamilton County at that time.

DR. CRAWFORD: That might have been in the Second.

MR. WAGNER: Let's see, First is up northeast, and the Second is Knoxville. I guess we did have Hamilton County. I really don't know what the make-up of the Third District was at that time. I do know there were twenty-one counties. Let's see Anderson, Roane, Loudon and Cumberland. . . . I believe that Anderson without Hamilton County was the largest population county in the Third District at that time. Those were the. . . and the county that Spring City was in. . . . Those were the counties that were the strongest. Because Roane County had a large population, Anderson County had a large population and had a lot of votes, we spent a lot of time there.

DR. CRAWFORD: What did you do in terms of advertising in the Third Congressional District.

MR. WAGNER: On a district basis we had a meeting in Cookeville one Sunday afternoon with all the members in the eastern quarter of the state--not the far east but the immediate from Nashville to Knoxville--that general area and all the people working in the campaign. A large number came and we had a meeting there at which material was distributed. At that time as I recall, there was no federal election law at that time so there was no restriction upon the amount of money that we could spend. It was announced that there would be a central advertising campaign through newspapers, radio, television and billboards.

This would be handled through the state campaign headquarters, but the individual counties could have their own advertising in the local newspapers as they saw fit if they could get commitments from dental organizations and medical organizations in your county. If you had the money you were encouraged to go ahead and advertise. So we got money in Roane County and Anderson County and other counties. I believe they had money in Loudon County. And in the counties large enough to have newspapers and get money then our campaign advertising was primarily by newspaper because the county was so small they didn't have television stations and all this was centralized out of headquarters and came to Knoxville, Chattanooga and Nashville and Memphis.

DR. CRAWFORD: Did you attempt any special fund raising in the Congressional district?

MR. WAGNER: There was nothing on a Congressional district although we had dinners in Roane County, Anderson County, I believe Loudon County had one. And we had as I indicated, we worked through some of the professional organizations, that is dental and medical organizations, feeling that two things were: one, some of the things he said they were in agreement with him, and secondly a lot of them knew him personally some from professional organizations. Donations were solicited just on an individual basis as well as from dinners.

DR. CRAWFORD: How did things change as you proceeded from the primary to the general election?

MR. WAGNER: It appeared that there was a little more centralization in that the headquarters in Nashville had had the experience of working statewide in a primary. Another difference was that there were definite position papers being given not only with respect to what Winfield Dunn stood for but this was what the Republican platform in the state was going to be not only from his point of view but from the Republican party was going to back this. The third change was that whereas before we had four candidates now the other three--at least in Roane County and in the other counties that I was in contact with--they came in solidly behind Winfield Dunn. We were able to expand our resources by using more people because the people who worked in the other campaigns were still workers in the Republican Party and they joined ranks to work for Republican candidates, all of them including Winfield Dunn even though theirs had lost.

DR. CRAWFORD: How did you change your activities other than that after the August primary?

MR. WAGNER: Generally, my activities didn't change a great deal, but we did have much more campaign material. As I recall Mrs. Dunn came through Roane County and we spent some time with her. In the primary there was not too much emphasis on billboards, at least in my district. And not too much emphasis on posters which we put up on telephones. But at this time when there was one candidate, then we received a lot of material and we distributed throughout the district. Each county that was able started opening up a Republican headquarters. We received pen posters and campaign material--literature for distribution--these in turn were sent out to the various counties for

distribution or in mailings.

DR. CRAWFORD: Did these things come from Nashville to you and you redistributed them to the counties?

MR. WAGNER: Generally yes, although to save postage and transshipment and repacking we gave them the name and addresses of those responsible in the various counties and most of the time this was sent directly to those individual people in the twenty-one counties just to save postage and transshipment. Sometimes a worker from headquarters would come through and leave a big box in the headquarters in Roane County for me. I would then get it out to the various counties as I made my travels around.

DR. CRAWFORD: Were you able to get it delivered rapidly as you scheduled to fill their needs?

MR. WAGNER: As I recall we were never short of material. I think Lynn, the lady with whom I worked, and had her contact, I would call her and tell her I needed something within a day or two and she would try to get it on the bus that afternoon or the next morning so I think we got good distribution and service from the headquarters. I know the way our telephone system was set up I had no trouble making contact with anybody that I needed in the headquarters when I needed material or an answer on something or some information on something that was not readily available. I had no trouble getting that information.

DR. CRAWFORD: Who was your contact in the central office?

Was it Carolyn Weins?

MR. WAGNER: I believe that is right.

DR. CRAWFORD: Let's go back a moment, Mr. Wagner, to the primary. How did your district do in number of votes? How did you feel about it? Did you have a quota that you were trying to reach personally?

MR. WAGNER: I don't recall. I keep saying, "I don't recall", but I worked in every campaign since 1960. And I work every two years and I worked in 1976 and '74 and '72, '70 and '68 and so forth. In some campaigns we were short of material and we were trying to get it, and that was difficult. So I am trying to isolate this one and put it in perspective.

DR. CRAWFORD: Since you are a veteran of numerous campaigns do you feel that this was a well organized and well run headquarters?

MR. WAGNER: Yes, I think it was a little bit fragmented in the primary. But it was a state-wide campaign as any governor's race is and these were new people in organizing and planning a campaign and it took them a while to get this organization and I would imagine that money was also a factor in the primary because the money from Republicans was going in four different directions with four candidates. But once the primary was over, then it appeared that while normally a campaign doesn't start until about Labor Day they had just one month after the primary which was held in the early part of August to really sit down and organize what they were going to do in the months of

September and October before the election in November. How did we do in the Third District?

It is my recollection that Maxey Jarman--and I may be way wrong--carried the Third District, but not by much. I believe if he did, the reason was that their campaign started a month before at least in the Third District before Winfield's did. Because as I indicated earlier I had been contacted in April--I'm pretty certain that it was April--to be the Roane County Chairman for Maxey Jarman. I attended a dinner for him and I am pretty certain that this was in April. I went with the understanding that I was going to see what he had to say, to meet him and to talk with him but not make a commitment. And I did this. And I said this to this Third District Chairman when he invited me. And I am almost certain it wasn't until May that Winfield Dunn came through.

So in the Third District Maxey Jarman was a very strong. His campaign started and was out a long time ahead of everybody else. He was strong in Roane County. He had a strong campaign manager in Roane County and started at least a month ahead of time. And I believe that he carried the Third District, but if so, not by much because he couldn't have by much because of Winfield's coming in second. That was in respect to your question earlier which I needed time to think about to give a good answer.

DR. CRAWFORD: Let me ask you for an impression, Mr. Wagner, you had declined an opportunity to participate in another campaign previously. You declined to do so to work for Winfield Dunn. Why did not do that? What compelled you to

make that decision? You were convinced apparently in your meeting with him. What did you think of at that time?

MR. WAGNER: Well, after I got his Christmas card, the only reason I remembered that name because Congressman Kuykendall had mentioned that he (Winfield) was thinking of being a candidate for governor--this was several months ahead of time as I had indicated that he was thinking of being a candidate for governor. Now. . .

DR. CRAWFORD: Was this August of 1969?

MR. WAGNER: Yes. Then I met him at the Lincoln Day Dinner in February in Knox County. Only for two or three minutes we visited and it was not something about the campaign that he was thinking about and he was here. He appreciated my comments and he remembered what I had written and that impressed me because if everybody had answered him I don't see how he could have remembered that. Or if a few people answered then maybe he appreciated the thought and not what I had written but the fact that I had taken the time to write.

We had a candidate's rally which the more I talk the more I remember. We had a candidate's rally in Roane County for all the candidates. Winfield Dunn was not present, but Grover Trent represented him. Subsequent to that, Winfield Dunn came through again talking with people and there was a luncheon and I attended the luncheon.

One thing--just a personal thing many people have commented on--in talking with him he looks right at you, he is not distracted, he doesn't look around at the other people in the room while

he is talking to you. But he looks straight at you or some part of your person, but he is not distracted by somebody else around. He gives his complete attention to what you are [saying] or at least gives you the impression that he is giving his complete attention to you. He may be thinking about something else, but you get the idea that he is listening only to you and what you are saying and this was very significant.

At the meeting at Grover Trent's office he mentioned some of the things that he was working for and that he wanted to implement, and how he was going to run his campaign. I liked the things that I heard. I was impressed by his intelligence. I was impressed by his ability to enunciate and elucidate his ideas so that people could understand what he was talking about. And he seemed to be a vigorous dynamic individual who could run a strong campaign. He was in it not to be the Republican candidate only but in it to win and he was going to devote his full time and effort toward that and not just to be a name candidate to be on the ballot to represent the Republican Party, but that he was going to an active and viable campaigner.

One other thing he came to Anderson County and spent a day here--he might have spent more--but I only recall one time that he came. We escorted him around. I got him by the hand and he went up and down the street and going in every business that we could and meeting everybody on the street, just getting his name and having him meet the people and shake hands with them. The name then got around Anderson County which was at that time the largest county in the Third District.

DR. CRAWFORD: And his name was not well-known over here at that time.

MR. WAGNER: That's right. He was definitely the dark horse because as I alluded to earlier, Maxey Jarman had come out first without a question that he was going to run and Winfield was still evaluating his chances and was still considering it and still making trips throughout the state getting people's impressions and had not really announced yet. So he was a dark horse and he came in late in announcing.

DR. CRAWFORD: Where were you on election night of November, 1970?

MR. WAGNER: In Roane County we had two headquarters that year. In the past Roane County has three dominant towns, Kingston, which is a town of about 4500 and the county seat, and Harriman about 12,000, and Rockwood of about 8,000. Now it is pretty hard to have headquarters in each one of those towns, but we pushed and strained and we were financially able to get a headquarters open in Rockwood, Harriman and Kingston while Oliver Springs is at the triangular section of Morgan County, Anderson County and Roane County so it is a little bit in Roane County. But we had headquarters in each of the three towns that year. The Rockwood headquarters was not open that night, but the one in Harriman and Kingston were open and I spent some time in Harriman who had cake and coffee and punch at Harriman and cake and nuts and candy and things like that in Kingston. And I spent my time in between those two headquarters up till about 9 or 10 o'clock. As I recall, Mrs. Wagner

and I drove to Knoxville to spend some time in the Knox County Republican headquarters and then came back about 11:30 or 12:00.

DR. CRAWFORD: Were you surprised at the outcome of the election?

MR. WAGNER: I believe I was. You go out with the idea that you are going to win and you tell all your supporters and your workers that you are going to win and that is part of politics. You don't want to say you are going to lose so that everybody quits working and sending out post cards and talking and telephoning and talking to their friends and their neighbors and their co-workers in the office. I would say we were mildly surprised. It was not a total upset in any sense of the word in that we had two real strong candidates--Bill Brock was running and Winfield Dunn. In talking with Democrats around the state--my Democratic friends in the eastern part of the state--before the election there was no question that they felt the Republican Party had put up two real strong candidates. Senator Baker was completing four years of a term and he was very active and very popular at the time and he campaigned with the two of them and these three young people made a very strong impression throughout the state. We had high hopes for winning both of them and I guess I might say we would be mildly surprised. It wasn't a shock! I wouldn't say we were shocked that we won. We were very pleased and happy and mildly surprised I would say as compared with Senator Brock losing in 1976 which was a great shock. To thousands of people that was a real shock as opposed to Winfield Dunn and Bill Brock winning in 1970. I think that was mild.

It appeared that it was going to go that way, but part of the reason we are having this interview and we are running this whole program is the fact that we have had our first a Republican governor for the first time in fifty years and the people were just reluctant to believe that this could take place. They were working for it and they were hoping for it, but to have it take place was mildly surprising.

DR. CRAWFORD: Are there any other facts about the campaign you'd like to have as part of the record?

MR. WAGNER: Here was a young man from one section of the state, from the Democratic section of the state--western part of the state--he had to come over and sell himself to the Republicans in the eastern part of the state because Tennessee is strongly Republican in the eastern part and he was from the west. He had won the primary over candidates from the eastern part of the state. So he had to mend the fences there to be sure there were no wounded people who were not assuaged with his personality and his ability to win and to encourage them to work for him and the Republican Party in the state. Then this idea that I alluded to earlier the fact that we had two strong [candidates]. One incumbent young senator who was very popular and very capable and is still very capable, and two outstanding young people running--Brock and Dunn showed that by having very capable people and running very strong campaigns that the Republicans can win. This is why we were shocked in 1976 although many analysts feel that it wasn't Brock that lost, it was carry-over from Watergate, at least in that campaign. Other than

that I have conversed with him several times since then and went to the inauguration but as far as the campaign itself, that is what I remember about it.



